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Reclaiming the Symbol: Ethics, Rhetoric, and the Humanistic Integration of GAI - A Burkean Perspective

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Abstract

This study delves into the intersection of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) and the Humanities, guided by the critical insights of Kenneth Burke, a seminal figure in the study of rhetoric and a vocal critic of scientism and positivism. The skepticism of the American literary theorist towards an uncritical embrace of science and technology, and his concerns over the inclination of the Humanities to adopt scientific methodologies at the expense of traditional forms of inquiry, provide a critical framework for examining the new role played by GAI within the Humanities. By framing these tools in the context of Burkean rhetorical theory, this research argues that AI in general should not be viewed as a foreign invader to the Humanities tradition but as an opportunity for them to reassert their indispensable role in guiding the ethical and purposeful integration of STEM into humanistic studies. Drawing on Burke's concepts of humans as "symbol-using animals" and literature as "equipment for living," the study positions AI as a sophisticated extension of human symbolic action, equipped to engage with ethical considerations and profoundly influence human life. This theoretical grounding underscores the importance of maintaining a humanistic perspective in the development and application of AI technologies, emphasizing the capacity of the Humanities to provide ethical direction and meaningful context to technological advancement. By highlighting Burkean critique of the overreliance on scientific approaches in the Humanities, the study advocates for a balanced integration of AI, where technology enhances rather than replaces traditional humanistic inquiry. This approach not only honors the legacy of the theorist but also addresses contemporary concerns within the Humanities about the ethical implications of these evolving generative technologies, suggesting a collaborative pathway forward that leverages the best of both humanistic and scientific traditions. Through this lens, AI emerges not merely as a tool for innovation but as a catalyst for reaffirming the Humanities' critical role in shaping a technologically advanced society with ethical depth and cultural significance.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Humanities, Technological critique, Symbolic action, Ethical technology

Introduction

Kenneth Burke (1897 – 1993), an eminent figure in the realms of rhetoric and ethics, presents a compelling framework for examining the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) with the

Humanities. His pioneering analyses, which delve into the essence of knowledge, marked a significant departure from conventional rhetoric, thereby enriching literary and rhetorical studies with his

groundbreaking notions (Rueckert, 1963). Burke's scholarly contributions are renowned for their depth and the integration of diverse disciplines, spanning philosophy, sociology, psychology, and literature. This interdisciplinary approach has left a lasting impact on various areas of inquiry, underscoring the critical role of symbolic interaction in deciphering human behavior and communication (Burke, 1966; 1973).

Despite his unconventional academic path, including his departure from Columbia University due to frustrations with the limitations of formal academia, Burke's intellectual legacy continues to command deep respect and influence. His critique of traditional academic norms underscored his dedication to intellectual liberty and innovation (Henderson, 1981). Burke's conceptualizations, especially his depiction of humans as "symbol-using animals" and his characterization of literature as "equipment for living," lay a profound groundwork for exploring AI's implications beyond its technological aspects (Burke, 1945; 1950).

By integrating Burke's insights into the study of AI and rhetoric within the Humanities, this research aims to enhance our comprehension of the ethical and symbolic dimensions technology entails. It challenges us to reconsider the confines of academic exploration, suggesting that Burke's comprehensive theoretical legacy, when combined with contemporary AI applications, has the capacity to forge a landmark discourse. This fusion promises to navigate the ethical and practical quandaries technological progress presents, thereby reaffirming the Humanities' critical stance in the age of digital advancement (Burke, 1973; Hawhee, 2005).

This study will demonstrate how the ethical, symbolic, and action-oriented considerations central to Burke's work provide a vital framework for understanding and navigating the development and application of AI. By foregrounding Burkean theory, this research aims to bridge the perceived divide between the enduring values of humanistic scholarship and the disruptive potential of digital innovation. It advocates for an interdisciplinary approach that treats AI not merely as a technological advancement, but as a powerful tool for ethical inquiry and a catalyst for the continued relevance of the Humanities. In doing so, this study seeks to establish how a Burkean perspective can enrich the dialogue surrounding artificial intelligence, ensuring that technological progress serves to amplify, rather than erode, our ethical and cultural landscapes.

Literature Review

This examination recognizes the profound impact of technological advancements on the core values of humanistic scholarship. Drawing upon a range of perspectives, this section seeks to illuminate the dynamic interplay of ethics, rhetoric, and AI technologies as they shape the contemporary Humanities. In navigating these complexities, the review will emphasize the ethical imperatives that must frame the development and use of AI. Rather than treating ethics as a mere afterthought, it underscores their centrality in ensuring that AI aligns with and enhances, not replaces, humanistic values (Byrne, 2023; Gill, 2023). Furthermore, the review will turn to rhetorical theory to offer critical tools for analyzing the narratives that shape how we understand and discuss AI. This approach will illuminate how AI technologies are presented, interpreted, and contested within society (Mattern, 2023).

Moreover, the literature review will highlight the distinctive contributions of the Humanities to the evolving discourse on AI. It

will emphasize the crucial role that humanistic perspectives play in illuminating the ethical dimensions of AI and its broader societal implications. The review will advocate for an integrated approach that draws upon the strengths of both the Humanities and the sciences, promoting a dialogue sensitive to the complexities of human values and technological advancement (Giuliana, 2023). By bringing together these diverse perspectives, the literature review will lay the groundwork for a nuanced discussion that re-examines the perceived divide between technology and humanistic thought. It suggests that the integration of AI within the Humanities, guided by ethical reflection and rhetorical awareness, offers a unique opportunity to revitalize the humanistic tradition in the digital age.

Building upon this foundation, the following section of the literature review delves into the wide-ranging ethical concerns, debates, and principles surrounding the development of AI technologies at large. This exploration is crucial as it highlights the complex ethical terrain that AI applications traverse in sectors such as healthcare, education, governance, and beyond. For instance, Molden (2024) examines the ethical aspects of AI within psychotherapy, raising vital questions about the potential effects of automation on the therapeutic relationship. The study stresses the need for ethical frameworks to balance the benefits and drawbacks of integrating AI into mental health services, ensuring that human empathy and connection remain central even within automated therapeutic models.

In the sphere of digital governance, Tojiev (2024) envisions the future of digital parliaments, stressing the delicate balance between efficiency, ethical principles, and inclusivity. This work highlights the importance of infusing human-centered values into the digital transformation of governance, using AI to strengthen democratic participation while maintaining firm ethical boundaries. Similarly, Keren (2024) tackles the ethical complexities surrounding infant mental health in a world of rapid technological change. This study advocates for a comprehensive ethical code to govern the sensitive interactions between AI, procreation, and early childhood development, demonstrating a need for proactive ethical guidance when integrating AI into such vital areas of human life.

Finally, Airaj (2024) explores the ethical dimensions of AI in higher education, proposing a model that ensures equitable knowledge access while protecting data privacy and upholding ethical standards. This study lays out a framework for the ethical use of AI within educational environments, where the goal is for AI to enhance the sharing of knowledge without sacrificing fundamental ethical principles. Taken together, these studies underscore the urgent need for robust ethical frameworks to shape the development and use of AI across diverse fields. They illuminate the complex ethical challenges AI poses, calling for a collaborative approach to ethical decision-making that engages stakeholders from a wide range of perspectives. Importantly, ethics is not the only arena where AI and the Humanities meaningfully intersect.

The study of AI and rhetoric exposes a complex interplay, revealing how this technology both shapes and is shaped by rhetorical practices. This section will examine the rhetorical narratives surrounding AI's potential and limitations, the evolution of rhetorical traditions in response to technological change, and the ethical issues emerging from AI-driven communication. Hirsch-Kreinsen and Krokowski (2024) dissect the rhetorical constructs that have influenced AI development, revealing the promises and functional challenges that dominate discussions of AI in both

public and academic spheres. Their analysis helps us understand how the language used to describe AI has shaped its evolution, affecting both public understanding and the direction of technological progress.

Additionally, Shokhitbekovna's (2024) work on the evolution of rhetorical traditions in Western Europe offers historical context, illuminating how contemporary AI and digital technologies impact both rhetorical education and practice. This study emphasizes the enduring value of traditional rhetorical analysis while exploring how these traditions adapt to the digital age, providing a rich framework for understanding AI's influence on established communication strategies and teaching models. Similarly, Becker et al. (2024) focus on the harmful rhetoric of antisemitism online, employing AI-powered analysis to dissect online hate speech and imagery. Their work demonstrates how AI can be an essential tool for rhetorical analysis, offering new ways to understand and address the dangers of harmful online communication.

In the sphere of higher education, Hajjaj (2024) examines the evolving rhetorical landscape spurred by the introduction of ChatGPT, highlighting the ethical quandaries and pedagogical shifts created by AI-powered communication tools. This work emphasizes the urgent need for educators to critically analyze AI's influence on communication and teaching, alongside a deep examination of associated ethical concerns. Overall, these studies underscore the complex interplay between AI and rhetorical practices, demanding that we carefully consider how AI technologies both mold existing rhetorical forms and create entirely new ones.

Building on these insights, this section explores the potential for a truly collaborative relationship between humanistic scholarship and AI technologies. We'll examine how their convergence affects research methodologies, ethical frameworks, and society's broader understanding of AI's place in our lives. For instance, Marabelli and Lirio (2024) address the integration of AI and the metaverse in the workplace, examining the opportunities and challenges this presents for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. Their work underscores the need for a humanist perspective that navigates the ethical and social complexities arising from AI's role in human resource management. These perspectives find further application in the realm of business. Daniel and John (2024) investigate how AI shapes mutual fund operations, focusing on investor engagement and changing compliance requirements. This study reveals the complex intersections of AI and finance, promoting a human-focused approach that balances efficiency with personalized, ethical investor interactions. The humanist perspective extends to the work of Asyhari et al. (2024), who examine the use of machine learning (ML), zakat (Islamic charitable giving), and transportation systems to promote public health. Their work demonstrates how AI can be combined with cultural and religious practices for social good, again emphasizing the vital role of the Humanities in applying and directing AI towards beneficial outcomes.

The most visible integration of AI within the Humanities likely resides in the vibrant field of digital Humanities. This intersection signals a significant shift in humanistic research, offering novel methodologies, fresh insights, and exciting new challenges. AI technologies are transforming digital Humanities practices by enhancing research processes, data analysis, and critical interpretation, always ensuring that ethical and methodological implications are deeply considered. For instance, Liu, Liu, Li,

Wang, and Huang (2024) provide a compelling example of AI's application in their analysis of Chinese Pre-Qin classic texts. By utilizing Humanities computing, they shed new light on the historical significance of person names, demonstrating AI's potential to unlock insights within traditional areas of humanistic inquiry.

Beyond traditional linguistic approaches, Wang, Li, and Li (2024) explore applications of AI and digital technology for sustainable development by examining the environmental Kuznets curve hypothesis across 214 countries. Their research highlights the importance of combining AI with economic, institutional, and social perspectives – an approach highly relevant to digital Humanities scholars focusing on environmental questions. García-Marzá and Calvo (2024) address the current "Second Age of Artificial Intelligence," emphasizing AI's profound impact on knowledge production, democracy, and ethical frameworks – all themes of immense importance to digital Humanities research. Finally, Raborife, Ogbuokiri, and others (2024) tackle the role of social media in fueling xenophobic violence in South Africa, utilizing machine learning models to examine hate speech. Their work shows how AI can be powerfully leveraged within digital Humanities to address urgent social issues and critically dissect our broader digital culture. Together, these examples spotlight the dynamic and interdisciplinary collaboration between AI and the digital Humanities. AI's integration into the field not only opens exciting methodological possibilities but also urges critical reflection on the ethical and cultural transformations brought about by the digital age.

Inspired by Kenneth Burke's critical stance toward the unbridled embrace of scientific and technological progress, an ethical critique of AI emerges as essential for the Humanities. Burke's concern that scientific methodologies could overshadow traditional humanistic inquiry (Burke, 1950; 1966) guides our examination of the ethical dimensions surrounding AI's rapid development and integration into the Humanities. This perspective highlights AI's potential to erode humanistic values and stresses the urgent need to prioritize ethical considerations at every stage of AI's design and implementation within the Humanities.

The integration of AI into the Humanities raises profound questions about data privacy, the potential for algorithmic bias, and the risk of AI reinforcing existing social inequalities. As AI technologies become increasingly complex, their capacity to shape aspects of human culture, identity, and societal standards intensifies (Mulgan, 2016; O'Neil, 2017). This underscores how crucial a humanistic approach to AI truly is. This approach allows for critical evaluation of these technologies, with the goal of ensuring their development and use in ways that promote human dignity and contribute to social justice.

Furthermore, this critique prompts us to reassess the role of the Humanities in this age of digital revolution. The Humanities should not merely adapt to technological advancements but must play a central role in shaping the ethical guidelines surrounding AI. By fostering collaboration between technologists and humanists, we can ensure that AI technologies align with humanistic values. This alignment can help mitigate the risks of unchecked AI development and use (Harari, 2016).

Implications and Argument

The ethical critique of AI, influenced by Burke, calls for a measured approach to AI integration within the Humanities. This

approach must prioritize ethics, uphold the distinctive value of humanistic traditions, and continuously scrutinize AI's societal impacts. In this way, we can leverage AI's potential while preventing it from undermining humanistic values. This is essential to ensure that AI serves as a tool for deepening human understanding and well-being, rather than exacerbating societal issues or diminishing the vital work of the Humanities.

A Burkean response to the integration of AI within the Humanities invites a profound shift: we must view AI not merely as a technological tool, but as a powerful extension of our symbolic lives, with profound ethical implications. Drawing on Burke's understanding of humans as fundamentally "symbol-using animals" (Burke, 1945) and his notion of literature as "equipment for living" (Burke, 1973), we can see AI as more than a computational tool. When combined with humanistic insights, it possesses the potential to enhance our ethical decision-making, offer deeper understanding of complex cultural narratives, and make positive contributions to societal well-being.

This perspective encourages us to develop and use AI technologies deeply informed by the values, ethics, and symbolic practices that define us as humans. It calls for the creation of AI systems capable of navigating the nuances of human language, culture, and ethical considerations, ensuring that these technologies amplify rather than erode human agency and our moral imperatives. By applying a Burkean lens, we are prompted to ask how AI can be developed to support and enhance our best qualities in ways that are both ethically responsible and culturally aware.

Furthermore, the Burkean approach highlights the critical importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between technologists, ethicists, and Humanities scholars in the design and use of AI. This collaborative model ensures that AI is not only technically advanced but also instilled with a deep understanding of human ethics, social contexts, and the symbolic systems that shape our meaning-making. Such collaboration is key to guaranteeing that AI technologies are anchored in principles that prioritize human dignity, autonomy, and social justice. Without this, we risk the development of biased, opaque, or dangerous AI systems.

This article has explored the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) within the Humanities through the insightful lens of Kenneth Burke's work on rhetoric and ethics. We've advocated for a model that deeply intertwines technological innovation with the core values and methods of humanistic inquiry. This Burkean response envisions a future where AI and the Humanities enjoy a symbiotic relationship. It stresses the vital need for AI to be developed with an unwavering focus on the symbolic practices and ethical considerations that define us as humans. Drawing on Burke's profound understanding of symbols and their ethical significance, this approach positions AI as a powerful tool to help us navigate the complex moral landscapes of our lives, enhancing both self-understanding and ethical action.

We have emphasized the importance of maintaining a humanistic perspective on AI, recognizing the indispensable role of the Humanities in providing essential ethical guidance and contextual understanding to technological advancements. This study challenges any tendency of the Humanities to over-rely on scientific methodologies, instead advocating for a balanced integration where AI complements, rather than replaces, traditional scholarly methods. This viewpoint not only honors Burke's legacy

but also tackles contemporary anxieties within the Humanities about the ethical risks of emerging AI technologies. It envisions a collaborative future where both the Humanities and the sciences contribute their unique strengths, positioning AI as a force that can amplify the Humanities' essential role in creating an ethically conscious and culturally rich technological society.

This approach provides a foundation for carefully examining how Burke's ideas can illuminate our understanding and use of AI within the Humanities. It champions a holistic perspective that balances ethics, symbolism, and practical application, placing Burke's work at the forefront of a discourse that reconciles the enduring traditions of humanistic inquiry with the realities of the digital age. We call for interdisciplinary dialogue that allows us to see AI as an instrument for ethical reflection and humanistic exploration. Doing so ensures AI technologies support human dignity, cultural enrichment, and unshakeable ethical integrity. By embracing Burke's framework, we are reminded of the power of symbols and narratives in shaping how we interact with technology. As the future of AI unfolds within the Humanities, Burke's insights provide guiding principles for creating a technological landscape that is ethical, meaningful, and deeply human-centered.

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